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Jordan Kuck

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Renewed Latvia. A Case Study of the Transnational Fascism Model

Jordan Kuck

PhD Candidate, Modern European History
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Department of History, 915 Volunteer Blvd., 6th Floor Dundord Hall
Knoxville, TN 37996-4065
jkuck@utk.edu

Abstract

This article examines the lesser-known authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis, the *Vadonis* [Leader] of Latvia from 1934–1940, as a case study of transnational fascism. Specifically, by investigating the nature of *Mazpulki* [Latvian 4-H] – an agricultural youth organization modeled on American 4-H which became during the Ulmanis regime a sort of unofficial ‘Ulmanis Youth’ institution – and its international connections, and particularly with Italy, the article contends that we should view the Ulmanis regime as having been part of the transnational fascist wave that swept over Europe in the period between the two world wars. The article also makes the historiographical point that the transnational fascism model offers key analytical methods for interpreting fascism’s syncretic nature, especially in the case of those regimes which had some recognizable features of ‘generic’ fascism but which have previously been categorized as merely authoritarian. Future studies of such regimes will expand our understanding of the nature of and links between the many varied manifestations of interwar fascism.

Keywords

Kārlis Ulmanis; Latvia; 4-H; Mazpulki; Campo Dux; transnational fascism; fascist youth organization; nationalism

Introduction

From a wider European perspective, Kārlis Ulmanis continues to be one of the twentieth century’s unduly forgotten figures, despite the fact that he belonged to the much-studied group of interwar European dictators. In part this is because Ulmanis was Latvian, and therefore studies on him are still almost

exclusively limited to Latvian-language publications.¹ But it is also because our scholarly gaze has long been focused primarily on the big powers. This article seeks to remedy that historiographical gap. Its purpose is to insert one feature of the Ulmanis regime (1934–1940) into wider comparative historiographical discussions about interwar Europe and the nature and diffusion of interwar fascism. Specifically, this article will look at one particular key portion of Ulmanis's authoritarian regime – Latvian 4-H, an agricultural youth organization known as *Mazpulki*² – to both illustrate the nature of the regime and prove the analytical usefulness of the transnational fascism model.³

Broadly speaking, until recently, most works on fascism could be divided into two groups: those examining 'mature' fascism or, as Aristotle Kallis has labeled it, the fascist 'maximum'; and those seeking to describe fascism by defining its most 'generic' or 'minimum' features.⁴ With this essential historiographical foundation having been laid, perhaps now it is time to turn to the transnational fascism approach, for it enables us to investigate a number of further important issues, such as the relationship between 'maximum' and 'minimum' fascist regimes and movements, how fascist ideas 'moved' across national borders, and the complicated reasons why 'generic' fascism could look so different in its national manifestations. Put another way, this new approach to fascist studies is insightful because it enables us to move beyond analyzing fascism as either hermetically existing distinct national movements or as a clearly defined international political system to instead investigate fascism as it really was: as a syncretic international political system that in its

¹ The most significant non-Latvian works include: Jürgen von Hehn, *Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur: zur Geschichte d. lettländischen Staatsstreichs vom 15. Mai 1934* (München: Isar Verlag, 1957); Paulis Indulis Lazda, 'The Role of Kārlis Ulmanis in the Formation of the Latvian State' (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1965); Kristine Wohlfart, 'Das Autoritäre Regime in Lettland im Spiegel der Reden von Karlis Ulmanis' (M.A. thesis, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, 1995); Jordan Kuck, 'The Legacy of "Vadonis" Ulmanis: Kārlis Ulmanis, Past, Present, and Future' (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2007); and the new English translation of *Laiks, telpa, vadonis* (2012), Deniss Hanovs and Valdis Tēraudkalns, *Ultimate Freedom—No Choice: The Culture of Authoritarianism in Latvia from 1934–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

² *Mazpulki* might be translated as 'youth groups' or 'regiments of youth.'

³ On transnational fascism, see Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Samuel Huston Goodfellow, 'Fascism as a Transnational Movement: The Case of Inter-War Alsace,' *Contemporary European History* 22 (2012): 87–106. Though he does not use the term, see also Dietrich Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism in Western Europe: German Nazis, Dutch and French Fascists, 1933–1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). On *Mazpulki*, surprisingly, this article is the first scholarly investigation.

⁴ Aristotle A. Kallis, 'To Expand or Not to Expand? Territory, Generic Fascism and the Quest for an "Ideal Fatherland",' *Journal of Contemporary History* 38 (2003): 237–238. As the sort of 'deans' of these camps, Stanley Payne has been incredibly influential in the former, while Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell have done much to define the concept of generic fascism.

individual national manifestations was in competition with and hence shaped by democracy and communism. Lastly, this approach also prompts us to analyze fascists' attempts to gain legitimacy by balancing a fine line between embracing national culture on one hand and, on the other, heralding the prestige of belonging to a burgeoning international political movement that espoused the creation of a new and better world.⁵

Kārlis Ulmanis and Latvian *Mazpulki*: a brief history

From a biographical standpoint, Kārlis Ulmanis was a most unusual European dictator. Born in 1877 in the westernmost part of the Russian Empire, Ulmanis did not come from a prominent family, and he did not rise to fame through the military or business. Rather, Ulmanis was a farmer's son who spent the formative years of his adult life in the American Midwest, where, living in exile due to his journalistic involvement in fomenting the 1905 Russian Revolution, he worked in menial agricultural jobs while attending school at the University of Nebraska. Ulmanis remained in America for six years, and he adjusted well, eventually working as a dairy instructor at the university before later trying his hand at running his own dairy. But in 1913, following Tsar Nicholas's declaration of a general amnesty, he decided to return home. There Ulmanis found employment as an agricultural journalist, a position which led him to become a nationalist leader in the Farmers' Union party. In 1918, following Latvia's declaration of independence, he was elected as the first prime minister of Latvia. However, despite his earlier democratic convictions and experiences, including three stints as prime minister, on the night of May 15, 1934, Ulmanis took over in a bloodless coup d'état, becoming the authoritarian *Vadonis* [Leader] of Latvia. Ulmanis remained in power until 1940, when he was deposed by Joseph Stalin's forces and shipped to a prison in present-day Turkmenistan, where, it is rumored, he died in 1942.⁶

⁵ On fascism as an international movement, see especially Michael Arthur Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928-1936* (New York: H. Fertig, 1972); Anthony James Joes, *Fascism in the Contemporary World: Ideology, Evolution, Resurgence* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978); George L. Mosse, *International Fascism: New Thoughts and New Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 1979); Stein Uglevik Larsen et al., *Who Were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980); Roger Griffin, *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Roger Griffin, 'Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age: From New Consensus to New Wave?', *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 1 (2012): 1–17, accessed February 27, 2013, doi:10.1163/221162512X623601. For an argument against the idea of fascism as an international movement, see especially Gilbert Allardyce, 'What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept,' *The American Historical Review* 84 (1979): 367–388.

⁶ For a biography of Ulmanis, see especially Alfreds Bērziņš, *Kārlis Ulmanis: cilvēks un valstsvīrs* (Brooklyn, NY: Gramatu Draugs, 1974); Edgars Dunsdorfs, *Kārļa Ulmaņa dzīve:*

As for *Mazpulki*, it was based on American 4-H, the agriculture-focused youth organization whose roots go back to the mid-to-late 1890s in agricultural school clubs in Nebraska, Iowa, and elsewhere in the Midwest.⁷ Having thus observed 4-H's growing popularity and important work during his years in Nebraska, Ulmanis proposed a Latvian version. But he struggled to find support – in part because the country had much recovery work to do following the devastating Great War and the subsequent *Latvijas atbrīvošanas karš* (1918–1920) [Latvian War of Liberation] – until the writer Ausma Roga, with Ulmanis's urging, translated into Latvian John Francis Case's 1927 book *Under the 4-H Flag*. The Latvian version, titled *Zem baltzaļā karoga* [*Under the White-Green Flag*], appeared in 1929 and its popularity helped Ulmanis bring his plans to fruition.⁸

The first *Mazpulki* club was founded in November 1929. The organization adopted the standard American 4-H four-leaf clover emblem with its 4-Hs—head, heart, hands, and health.⁹ According to the lead essay that Ulmanis wrote in 1931 for the first edition of *Mazpulks*, the official monthly periodical of *Mazpulki*, the purpose of the organization was to promote a general respect in society for agriculture and to encourage a general love for the land and the Latvian farm among Latvia's youth. In the article, Ulmanis encouraged the youth to show 'self-initiative' so as to 'free them[selves] from the excessive deference to others, and especially among foreigners.'¹⁰ In other words, this was an appeal to do away with the deference shown to the historic overlords of the region, the Baltic Germans, the community of minority ethnic Germans who had had an inordinate impact on Latvian lands since the thirteenth century, when the Teutonic Knights first arrived. It should also be noted that in addition to the Baltic Germans, during the interwar period Latvia also had a large number of other ethnic minorities (especially in the southern and eastern regions) who comprised nearly a quarter of the total population. Finally, Ulmanis issued a challenge, telling the *Mazpulki* readers that they must show their parents new and better ways to do things so that the countryside can

ceļinieks, politiķis, diktators, mocekļis (Stockholm: Daugava, 1978). On Ulmanis's coup and regime, see Vita Zelče et al., ed., *Reiz dzīvoja Kārlis Ulmanis* (Rīga: Zinātne, 2007); Valters Ščerbinskis and Ēriks Jēkabsons, *Apvērsums: 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījums* (Rīga: Latvijas nacionālais arhivs, 2012); Deniss Hanovs and Valdis Tēraudkalns, *Laiks, telpa, vadonis: autoritārisma kultūra Latvijā, 1934–1940* (Rīga: Zinātne, 2012).

⁷ John D. Orr, *The History of 4-H in Nebraska* (Lincoln, NE: Cooperative Extension Service, University of Nebraska, 1985), 3–4.

⁸ 'Vēsture,' *Latvijas Mazpulki*, accessed April 3, 2013, <http://www.mazpulki.lv/lv/page/vesture>. For a dramatic English-language account of the War of Liberation, see Modris Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of Our Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1999).

⁹ 'Vēsture,' *Latvijas Mazpulki*.

¹⁰ Kārlis Ulmanis, 'Mazpulku dalībniekiem,' *Mazpulks*, Nr. 1 (February 1931), 2.

begin to prosper again and one day become 'just as attractive as life in the cities.'¹¹

These sorts of initiatives – the need to modernize farm practices, to stem the flow of rural youth to the cities, and to improve the quality of life on the farms – mirrored the ambitions of American 4-H, and they naturally appealed to young people in the Latvian countryside, and especially the boys, since Latvia was facing developmental and demographic challenges akin to those in America. But such a narrow demographic group meant that the organization saw somewhat sluggish growth during its first five years, at least in comparison to what happened after Ulmanis's coup. For example, over the first four and a half years of its existence, *Mazpulki* grew to 377 clubs and 5,846 members. But in the year immediately following the 1934 coup, *Mazpulki* expanded its scope by adding new housekeeping programs for young women and encouraging new social activities (such as summer camps) aimed at urban youth, and as a result by May 1935 the organization had grown by 430 new clubs and had added nearly thirteen thousand additional members. Many of these new clubs were in the cities, as the number of urban clubs grew from twelve in 1934 to 119 by 1939. This tremendous growth throughout the so-called 'Ulmanis Years,' as the period of Ulmanis's authoritarian rule is colloquially known, led to *Mazpulki* becoming not only the largest youth organization in the country, with more than forty thousand members (in a country of approximately two million people), but also one of the most noteworthy and powerful, with Ulmanis himself adopting the title of *Virsvadonis* [Supreme Leader] of *Mazpulki* following the establishment of his non-democratic rule.¹²

Mazpulki and Latvian fascism

Given the tremendous growth of *Mazpulki* during the Ulmanis Years, at least one observer noted in 1939 that 'it would be difficult for one to find another sector of our life that has been so greatly influenced by the historic May developments [i.e., by the May 15 coup] as has been the development of the *Mazpulki* organization.'¹³ Consequently, given its national significance, *Mazpulki* serves as an interesting case study and vantage point to examine the nature of the Ulmanis regime.

Although *Mazpulki* leaders did not openly describe the post-1934 organization as a 'fascist' youth organization, we should conclude that – at Ulmanis's

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² These statistics were taken from 'Mazpulki,' in *Atjaunotās Latvijas 5 gadu sasniegumu skates lauksaimniecības izstāde: Pārskats*, ed. J. Ķengis and M. Vagulāns (Jelgava: Latvijas lauksaimniecības kamera, 1939), 153–162.

¹³ Ibid., 153.

urging – it adopted many fascist-style characteristics and practices. Whereas prior to 1934 the organization was seen as a predominantly rural agricultural institution, following the coup it was transformed into more of a general youth organization, within which nationalism and militarism were increasingly encouraged, as was the cultivation of an Ulmanis cult of personality. And while the original four-leaf clover emblem was retained, the official motto was changed to '*Augsim Latvijai!*' [We Will Grow for Latvia!], a slogan which cleverly incorporated and blended the increased emphasis on nationalism with the organization's continued focus on agriculture and pedagogy. Likewise, rather than promoting civic identities and broad community activism, two of the aims of American 4-H, the organization became ultranationalistic and *Mazpulki* members increasingly took front stage at grand political events, such as the annual May 15 celebrations that marked the anniversary of Ulmanis's coup.

In order to understand how Latvia fit into transnational fascism, first we must examine the national level. To do this we will investigate a number of especially interesting and insightful events, where the self-presentation of the regime was vividly on display. One such occasion was the first ever congress of *Mazpulki* leaders in April 1935. The three-day event in Riga brought together more than nine hundred *Mazpulki* leaders from every region of Latvia. On the afternoon of April 26, the last day of the leadership conference, Ulmanis gave a formal address in the grand hall of the Latvian Society House. Recognizing the importance of this address for the future of both *Mazpulki* and his regime, Ulmanis chose to explain for his audience, which also included those tuning in on the radio, the backdrop to recent developments in Latvia. More specifically, Ulmanis turned to a discussion of Italian Fascism to clarify why the leaders were learning about ideas rather than specific, prepared work plans. Fearing that there might be a misunderstanding or perhaps even disillusionment or anger at the fact that the leaders had been called to Riga only to find out that nothing had yet been fully prepared, Ulmanis turned to a long theoretical discussion of Mussolini's seminal 1932 treatise on fascism. Pulling directly from Mussolini's writings, Ulmanis clarified that: 'In the beginning . . . fascism was only work and action. Fascism was not founded autocratically or artificially . . . with the help of some sort of developed doctrine: it was born out of the necessity for action, and thus fascism itself was work and action.'¹⁴ Consequently, he continued, if:

someone today would read the news about the founding meetings of Italian Fascism in the already yellowing newspapers of that time, he wouldn't find there any doctrine, only rudimentary teachings, remarks, and hypotheses which had been freed from all of the unintentional additions, which after some years evolve a healthy line of foundational

¹⁴ 'Valsts Prezidenta Dr. K. Ulmaņa uzruna mazpulku vadītājiem,' *Vadītājs*, November 1, 1937, 301–302.

thought, and which thus turned fascism into a completely independent political doctrine, one which stands against all other previous and current doctrines.¹⁵

Finally, to finish his lesson, Ulmanis explained, again quoting Mussolini, that after the establishment of Fascism in Italy, there was ‘a period of work and struggle. There could not be a theoretical doctrine, and beautiful and fine paragraphs could not be distributed and discussed, because instead of that there had to be something else, something a lot more powerful, of course: a living faith.’ Therefore, he concluded, it is only after a long period of work and struggle that fascism can ‘definitively take a position on all economic and intellectual questions which affect present-day humanity.’¹⁶

With the significance of Mussolini’s words still lingering in his listeners’ minds, Ulmanis immediately turned to how all of this related to *Mazpulki*. He asked, wondering out loud, ‘Why is it exactly that the number of Mazpulki clubs and members grew so strongly in 1934?’ To be sure, he answered, it is because May 15 changed Latvia. It changed Latvia by giving people the ability to work. But more than anything, he argued, May 15 rekindled a sense of togetherness that harkens back to ‘that great era of enthusiasm and affectionateness when great workers like Kronvalds, Auseklis, Valdemārs, and the other greats of that time were walking among the people.’¹⁷ Having thus framed ‘renewed Latvia’ [*atjaunotā Latvija*], as the regime called the post-coup era, as a rebirth of the nineteenth-century era of national awakening – meaning that by extension he was also placing himself in the pantheon of great Latvian nationalist leaders – and after further discussing how this rebirth was already changing Latvia, Ulmanis came full circle by ending his speech with another powerful quote from Mussolini. He avowed: ‘We are seeing the future! That which we will achieve will be superior to that which has already been achieved. This spirit of the future carries in itself the life and glory of the nation. It will consistently rise above that which today is fading into oblivion. . . . Life is beautiful, but still, to live without any ideals is worse than not living at all.’¹⁸

There are a number of noteworthy details here. First of all, it is interesting to note that Ulmanis chose, in an indirect yet obvious way, to tie Latvia and himself to Italy and Mussolini. As has been pointed out by a number of scholars, such a position was always difficult for fascist leaders, in that they had to attempt on the one hand to be ultranationalistic and omniscient while on the other hand also referencing their connections to other great foreign leaders as proof of their membership in an alluring transnational movement.¹⁹ For

¹⁵ Ibid., 302.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 303.

¹⁸ Ibid., 308.

¹⁹ For two compelling studies, see Gary Love, “What’s the Big Idea?”: Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007):

instance, here Ulmanis simultaneously attempted to cultivate his connections to transnational fascism while also arguing that such a model had led to the organic rebirth of the nation, a palingenetic trope that Roger Griffin has identified as the core of fascist ideology.²⁰ Furthermore, there were tough decisions to be made in regard to whom to invoke, with Mussolini and Hitler serving, of course, as the two prime examples for most fascist leaders. In this case it should not be surprising that Ulmanis avoided any reference to Hitler and Germany because, as was noted above, there were centuries-old tensions between Latvians and Baltic Germans. Finally, in terms of interpreting and explaining fascism, in the Latvian case Mussolini's 1932 treatise was a principal reference point.

Yet another telling event was the three-day celebration held in Riga on September 2–4, 1939 to mark *Mazpulki's* ten year anniversary. The celebration – which was intended both to mark a milestone and to serve as a way of further increasing the organization's popularity and prominence, and especially among the parents of urban youth²¹ – was incredibly large for a small nation and required over a year of planning, as it brought together more than twenty thousand members from all 1,085 clubs at a cost of more than 55,000 lats.²² Additionally, there were a substantial number of invited foreign guests, including 4-H leaders and members from the United States, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Lithuania, and Estonia.²³ Over the three days, there were a large number of activities, including the formal *Mazpulki* parade, which occurred on September 3. At 17:00, three thousand members gathered at the former Cathedral Square, which had been expanded to accommodate mass rallies and renamed May 15 Square in 1936, for their ceremonial march down Castle Street, where Ulmanis, key government ministers, *Mazpulki* leaders, and the foreign guests were awaiting the procession on the balcony of the presidential castle. The first ones in the parade were the oldest boys, who were dressed in their formal grey paramilitary uniforms. At the very front of the parade were the bearers of the 1,085 green and white *Mazpulki* flags, with each listing the name and number of the respective club. After that came a group of two hundred

447–468; and Dietrich Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism in Western Europe: German Nazis, Dutch and French Fascists, 1933–1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²⁰⁾ In particular, see Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991).

²¹⁾ *Mazpulki* leaders often focused on generational divides, and they constantly sought to ensure that parents would support their child's desire to join the organization. For example, see *Latvijas valsts vēstures arhīvs* (hereafter LVVA), 1690. f., 4. apr., 1447. l., 181. lp.

²²⁾ For example, a memo about the event was sent to Ulmanis in April 1938. See LVVA 1690. f., 4. apr., 1479. l., 123. lp. On the budget: LVVA, 1690. f., 4. apr., 1447. l., 55. lp.

²³⁾ LVVA, 4820. f., 4. apr., 1447. l., 70. lp.; LVVA, 1690. f., 4. apr., 1479. l., 107. lp.; '20.000 jauniešu zvērēsts tēvzemei, tūkstoši karogu sveic Prezidentu,' *Brīvā zeme*, September 4, 1939, 3. For information on the organizing committee, see especially LVVA 1690. f., 4. apr., 1483. l. It should be noted that Germany and Italy did not have a 4-H organization.

armed *Mazpulki* members who marched past the castle in perfect military formation with one arm raised in a fascist-style Roman salute while the other secured a rifle against their shoulders. Next in line were the leaders and a large contingent of the younger boys and girls. Finally, the last group to greet Ulmanis and the crowd, which had gathered in the green space across the street, were the oldest girls, who were dressed in their traditional regional folk costumes, whose bright colors contrasted sharply with the white handkerchiefs that the girls waved while greeting Ulmanis. As the parade drew to a close, the crowd of onlookers serenaded Ulmanis with shouts of '*Lai dzīvo!*' [Long may he live!].²⁴

Following the formal procession, the members, leaders, and foreign guests made the five-kilometer trek to a primary site of Latvian nationalism: the Cemetery of Brothers, the cemetery and national monument for soldiers killed in the First World War and the War of Liberation. To be sure, the scene that night was a memorable one tinged with fascist aesthetics and ritual. Amid the more than two thousand graves and the ornamental flowers, shrubs, and bushes which line the pathways separating each uniform row of headstones, and enclosed within the high cemetery walls that impart to the cemetery its emotive intimacy, the *Mazpulki* members and their guests gathered for a torch-lit ceremony. For many, the event evoked ethereal feelings, as suggested by one observer who noted that, with the more than twenty thousand youth, 'whose grey uniforms mixed with the darkness of the evening dusk . . . it seemed as though the graves opened up and the spirits of the fallen heroes were one with the living.'²⁵

After everyone had taken their places – including the one thousand armed *Mazpulki* members, 'whose young hands,' wrote one journalist, 'held the rifles just as securely as they hold the scythe or plow in their fathers' field' – a small group of *Mazpulki* leaders methodically and dramatically made their way into the graveyard.²⁶ In these leaders' arms were ceremonial urns containing handfuls of sacred dirt from historic locations such as Ulmanis's birthplace and major battle sites from the two recent wars. Once they had reached their positions, Roberts Dzērve, the head of *Latvijas lauksaimniecības kamera* [Latvian Chamber of Agriculture], the parent organization of *Mazpulki*, broke the silence with his greetings to those dignitaries and special guests in attendance, including General Jānis Balodis, the current Minister of War and famous war veteran who had played an integral part in Ulmanis's 1934 coup.²⁷ He then

²⁴) LVVA, 4820. f., 1. apr., 4. l., 119–125. lp.; '20.000 jauniešu zvērests tēvzemei, tūkstoši karogu sveic Prezidentu,' 3; 'Prezidents vēro mazpulku pausmes gājienu,' *Rīts*, September 4, 1939, 3.

²⁵) '20.000 jauniešu zvērests tēvzemei, tūkstoši karogu sveic Prezidentu,' 3.

²⁶) *Ibid.*

²⁷) Balodis played a seminal role in leading the new Latvian army through the War of Liberation. See especially Arnolds Auziņš, *Ģenerālis Jānis Balodis* (Rīga: Jumava, 2006).

thanked the *Mazpulki* members for their service and patriotism, which, he noted, 'you have displayed, with a love of the fatherland burning in your hearts, by carrying Latvia's sacred soil to the altar of the fatherland.'²⁸ We *Mazpulki* members, he continued, 'have come to this place as a result of listening to our hearts. We have come to promise to live and work for Latvia.' The soil in these urns, he explained to them, serves two purposes: it reminds us of our duty, and it 'tells you, the fallen heroes, that your sacrifice has not been in vain. The land for which you have struggled belongs to the Latvian nation, and its borders, which you have guarded, are secure and unchangeable. We have grown strong in belief and courage and ardent in our love of the fatherland.' At the end of his remarks, Dzērve asked everyone to join him in the singing of the national anthem, 'God Bless Latvia.'²⁹

The ceremony involving the sacred urns came next. Kārlis Ķīrsis, the superintendent of *Mazpulki* and the editor of the official periodical, *Mazpulks*, led a call-and-answer performance, in which he asked the chosen leaders carrying the urns whether they were following Ulmanis's directives. As each leader stepped up to the large sandstone urn, whose massive lid was shaped as an eternal flame, they shouted a promise to *Mazpulki*, the nation, and Ulmanis, whereupon they poured the contents of their urn into the larger receptacle placed at the feet of the large statue of Mother Latvia, who, with a wreath in one hand and the national flag in the other, achingly looks down on her lost sons. These promises, which had to be approved in advance by the *Mazpulki* leadership, included proclamations such as: 'Latvia must be a Latvian state – for a national Latvia and the Supreme Leader!' or 'The word Latvia is a sacred word. For a Latvian Latvia [*latvisku Latviju*] and our Supreme Leader!'³⁰ Finally, when the last urn had been emptied, every member pledged in unison: 'We swear to love and protect this land so that Latvia might forever remain a Latvian state!' And at that exact moment, to provide an extra surge of emotions, the assembled orchestra began playing somber yet powerful music. Apkalns, an army instructor, then brought the ceremony to a close by commanding the participants to never forget the promises they had made to Ulmanis and Latvia.³¹

The final day of the anniversary celebrations were scheduled to coincide with Ulmanis's birthday, and the closing ceremony that afternoon was held at *Uzvaras laukums* [Victory Field], the new multi-purpose amphitheater

²⁸) '20.000 jauniešu zvērests tēvzemei, tūkstoši karogu sveic Prezidentu,' 3.

²⁹) Ibid.; LVVA, 4820. f., 1. apr., 4. l., 119–125. lp.

³⁰) LVVA, 1690. f., 4. apr., 1483. l., 81. lp.; LVVA, 4820. f., 1. apr., 4. l., 119–125. lp. It should be noted that on the whole the regime had a cultural-linguistic understanding of 'nation.' Thus calls for a 'Latvian Latvia' did not directly equate to calls for an ethnically pure Latvian state.

³¹) 'Mazpulku lielā skate,' *Mazpulks*, September 15, 1939, 413; '20.000 jauniešu zvērests tēvzemei, tūkstoši karogu sveic Prezidentu,' 3, 11.

and parade grounds that had hosted the Ninth General Song Festival the previous summer.³² The ceremony began at 16:00, and it was broadcast on the radio, during which Dzērve, Ķirsis, Arnolds Lūsis, who was at that time the head of *Mazpulki's* education and propaganda department, and other prominent leaders gave prepared remarks to the radio audience about *Mazpulki* and its role as the 'fulfiller of the idea of 15 May' in Ulmanis's 'renewed Latvia.'³³ Archbishop T. Grīnbergs opened the occasion by providing his blessings. Gifts and ceremonial flags were presented to Dzērve, Alfreds Bērziņš, who was the Minister of Public Affairs, and other key government ministers. It was also at this time that honorary awards were presented to a number of special foreign guests in recognition of their outstanding work in 4-H. Perhaps most interesting here are the awards given to the American contingent from the Cooperative Extension Service, the educational branch of the United States Department of Agriculture which oversees 4-H. The group was comprised of the former and current directors, the vice-director, and a number of Extension Service agronomists. Three of them were given the Order of Three Stars, third class medal, an award that only one other foreign guest received.³⁴

Then, to thunderous applause, Ulmanis walked onto the stage, and, looking out at the perfectly aligned rows of more than twenty thousand *Mazpulki* members, he shouted: 'Greetings, Mazpulki! Grow for Latvia!' In unison, the members raised their right arms in a Roman salute and responded, 'We will grow for Latvia!'³⁵ In his subsequent speech entitled 'My Faith Belongs to You, Mazpulki,' Ulmanis celebrated the organization's achievements. But, given the recent outbreak of war in Poland, he forewarned of darker days ahead. Addressing the 'political clouds' that, he admitted, 'are preoccupying our thoughts,' Ulmanis bemoaned that they 'are menacing our and all of humanity's most precious possession: peace. And in place of peace stands conflict between many nations and states.' Thus, while we should be grateful that 'we are outside of this zone of conflict,' he continued, we nonetheless must be prepared, despite our 'hope [that] it never arrives . . . to get through the war time restrictions and the limitations and discomforts of life. And we will achieve this because the important developments of such weighty days makes us feel in the most ardent way just how beloved our land is to us, and how dear to us

³² On the history of *Uzvaras laukums/parks*, see Māris Ruks, *Spridzinātāji* (Rīga: Apgāds Antava, 2011). It should be noted that since the first song festival in 1873, these song festivals, which generally take place on a five-year schedule, have remained perhaps the single most significant public celebration of Latvian national identity and culture.

³³ See LVVA, 1690. f., 4. apr., 1483. l., 44. lp.

³⁴ 'Mazpulku lielā skate,' 417–418; 'Latvijas mazpulku draugi – ārzemnieki,' *Mazpulks*, September 15, 1939, 420.

³⁵ 'Mazpulku lielā skate,' 417.

is our state, our Latvia.³⁶ Having laid out this impending challenge, Ulmanis brought his speech to a close with these words:

Mazpulki youth! My faith belongs to you! Mazpulki! Your achievements are the fruits of your will and labor. Remain supremely confident in your own ability, maintain pride in your work successes—then you will have courage in the rest of your life's work and in your effort to stand at the front of the line, to pull others along, and to fulfill your duty and mission as members of the nation, as citizens of the state. The land will bless your group. The fatherland will bless its builders, its defenders, its protectors. God, bless Latvia!³⁷

The multi-day anniversary festival then concluded with an hour-long display of military-style marches, folk dancing, and a callisthenic program which included a human choreography element – a common fascist practice – in which the members spelled out in giant letters 'We greet the Leader,' above which more members positioned themselves as a half-sun (an important symbol in Latvian culture) surrounding the organization's four-leaf clover emblem, while the last group formed '4. IX' in recognition of Ulmanis's birthday.³⁸

Perhaps the first thing to say about these vignettes is that clearly the leaders of *Mazpulki* were attempting to adopt a sense of fascist practices and aesthetics that would be at once both recognizably 'Latvian' and 'fascist.' For example, in regard to the former we see an embrace of folk culture, as exemplified in the folk costumes, dances, symbols, etc. But we also see examples of the latter, such as the cult of the Leader, the use of the Roman salute, the embrace of militarism, human choreography, and, most significantly, the fascist sacralization of soil, space, culture, etc.³⁹ Another interesting aspect is the vow, made during the torch-lit ceremony, that Latvia's borders would remain unchanged. This is fascinating because while many other fascist regimes had irredentist goals, the Ulmanis regime certainly did not. Thus, the Latvian case further bolsters Kallis's argument that territorial expansionism should not be considered a basic tenet of generic fascism.⁴⁰

It is also intriguing to note that the largest number of honored foreign guests at the anniversary celebration came from the United States. This was the case, as the memos suggest, because 4-H originated in America and the Latvians wanted to honor that fact.⁴¹ But it is interesting that there was apparently no discussion about whether for both parties it would be ideologically problematic, in an era of heightened ideology, to recognize Americans, including

³⁶) 'Mazpulki, jaunatne, mana ticība pieder jums!,' *Mazpulks*, September 15, 1939, 386–387.

³⁷) Ibid.

³⁸) LVVA, 4820. f., 1. apr., 4. l., 119–125. lp.; 'Mazpulku lielā skate,' 417.

³⁹) On the topic of fascism and the sacralization of politics, see especially Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁴⁰) Kallis, 'To Expand or Not to Expand?'

⁴¹) LVVA, 1690. f., 4. apr., 1447. l., 70. lp.

members of the Roosevelt Administration, at an ultranationalistic, fascist-style Latvian event. Likewise, it would also be interesting to learn if the Americans had any qualms about accepting the invitation. Whatever the case, it raises questions for further research about the relationships between democracy and fascism and the role of multinational organizations as conduits of ideas and sites of ideological intermingling.

Mazpulki, Italian Fascism, and Campo Dux

Another way to illuminate the Latvian case is to place it in a wider perspective and look at the transnational movement of people, or what one scholar has called ‘journeys through fascism.’⁴² In such a way, Ferruccio Guido Cabalzar’s visit to Latvia in June 1935 is particularly interesting. A longtime colleague of Mussolini’s, the editor of *Giornale di Genova*, and a member of *Comitati d’Azione per l’Universalita di Roma* [CAUR; Action Committees for the Universality of Rome] – the group which organized and chaired two Fascist International Congresses in Montreux, Switzerland in December 1934 and April 1935 – Cabalzar had traveled to Latvia on behalf of CAUR to learn more about Ulmanis’s Latvia, especially its cultural organizations like *Mazpulki*. The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Latvian-Italian Society, which was headed by Professor K. Straubergs, jointly arranged Cabalzar’s visit. On June 12, his first day in Latvia, Cabalzar met with Ulmanis in the presidential castle. According to Cabalzar, the two had pleasant conversations, from which, he told the Latvian press, he took away ‘the very best impression.’ In fact, Cabalzar said that he, Ulmanis, ‘reminded me of a family father, a good-hearted leader of his people, and on his face I couldn’t find any sort of meanness or harshness.’⁴³ Actually, in this way, he explained, attempting to link the two countries’ leaders, Ulmanis is quite like Mussolini, whom ‘many have an incorrect opinion of . . . His face also does not express any sort of meanness or even the slightest bit of coldheartedness but only gentleness and kindness.’⁴⁴ The next day, June 13, Professor Straubergs, F. Andersons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Press Department, and Edvarts Virza, a well-known writer who often worked with the Ministry of Public Affairs, took Cabalzar by automobile for a tour of the Latvian countryside in the historic region of Zemgale in south-central Latvia, including to the location where Ulmanis had spent his childhood.

⁴² Charles Burdett, *Journeys through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing between the Wars* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007).

⁴³ ‘Mussolini uzticības persona Rīgā,’ *Rīts*, June 13, 1935, 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

One of the highlights of Cabalzar's visit to Latvia was a formal gathering at Riga's Hotel de Rome on the evening of June 14. The event was put on by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to honor Cabalzar, and those in attendance included J. Druva, the head of the Latvian Press Association; Foschini, who was the Italian press representative in Latvia; and other prominent members of the local press. Two ceremonial speeches were given. V. Jankavs, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Press Department, wished Cabalzar a splendid stay in Latvia and expressed his desire that Cabalzar's visit might bring about closer relations between Italy and Latvia. Cabalzar responded by thanking Jankavs for his remarks while further noting that he had very much enjoyed his time in Latvia. In particular, he said that he was impressed by Latvia's achievements and was amazed by everything that Ulmanis had accomplished in the last year. With that in mind, he noted for his audience, you can be sure that Latvia 'is in tested and secure hands.'⁴⁵ He then thanked his hosts and promised that he would do everything possible to ensure that he could return the favor by arranging for his Latvian colleagues a visit to Italy.

During the remainder of his stay, Cabalzar met with members of *Aizsargi*, a paramilitary organization originally formed in 1919, and *Mazpulki*.⁴⁶ On June 15 he convened with Dzērve, Ķirsis, and Lūsis to discuss *Mazpulki*, agriculture in Latvia, and the trip that was planned for the following day. Cabalzar was then taken to the *Aizsargi* headquarters, where he met up with Jankavs and Lieutenant Colonel Prauls. The three men left Riga by automobile and drove to Ogre, approximately forty kilometers up the Daugava River from Riga, to observe an *Aizsargi* training exercise. Upon arriving, the *Aizsargi* troops greeted Cabalzar with a Roman salute and the salutation 'Long live Italy! Long live Mussolini!' Cabalzar raised his right arm and, finishing the obvious attempt at creating a transnational fascist parallel, answered: 'Long live Latvia! Long live Ulmanis!'⁴⁷ After observing the exercise, the group then concluded their tour by attending a local *Aizsargi* festival in Ulbroka, a small town on the eastern outskirts of Riga. There the men took in a shooting competition, individual sporting events, and a volleyball tournament, followed by a demonstration of Latvian folk dancing.⁴⁸

On June 17 Cabalzar spent the day learning more about *Mazpulki*. He was taken via automobile by Ķirsis and two others up the scenic coast of Vidzeme, Latvia's northernmost province. Along the way they stopped in Ādaži, some twenty-four kilometers north of Riga, where they were greeted by local

⁴⁵ 'Tevērojama itāļu publicista viesošanaš Rīgā,' *Latvijas Kareivis*, June 16, 1935, 6.

⁴⁶ On the *Aizsargi*, see especially Ilgvars Butulis, *Sveiki Aizsargi!: Aizsargu organizācija Latvijas sabiedriski dzīvē, 1919.-1940. gadā* (Rīga: Jumava, 2011).

⁴⁷ 'Dr. Kabalzars viesos pie aizsargiem,' *Rīts*, June 16, 1935, 16.

⁴⁸ 'Aizsargu swehtki Ulbrokā,' *Ogres Straume*, June 22, 1935, 2.

Mazpulki youth who presented Cabalzar with flowers and an official 4-H flag which was to be presented to Mussolini.⁴⁹ Cabalzar thanked them for their kind gifts and spoke about his own memories of organizing a youth organization in Italy. The group subsequently spent the rest of the day touring so-called new and old farms, meaning those farms founded before and after the monumental agrarian reform of 1920.⁵⁰

During his time in Latvia, Cabalzar agreed to sit down for a number of interviews with the local press, most of which were apparently conducted in French.⁵¹ While summing up his trip, which was nearing its end, Cabalzar explained that he had come to Latvia for two reasons: to learn about the latest developments in Latvia, and to 'explain the mind of Mussolini.'⁵² Though he did talk about his positive impressions of Latvia, the majority of his comments were aimed at explaining fascism. At its core, fascism is idealism, he told them. Noting its transnational nature, he argued that fascism is sweeping over Europe because 'we need idealism . . . as many people in Europe [are] feel[ing] anxious not because they might lack . . . material worth, but really because they have lost their higher goals. These goals must be found in the organization of the state.' Consequently, fascism, he reiterated, is 'the idea of the state.'⁵³ He then corrected the erroneous idea that Italian Fascism is a 'type of export.' This is incorrect, he emphasized, because 'the foundational ideas of fascism . . . belong to the whole world.'⁵⁴ Furthermore, while on the one hand he expressed his strong disagreement with the National Socialists' emphasis on racism and racial purity – something which disturbed him on a personal level since his grandmother was a Tyrol German – on the other hand he explained that not all manifestations of fascism will look the same since the local characteristics of each country will produce different manifestations.⁵⁵ Consequently, with these comments Cabalzar concluded his visit – perhaps with the aim of recruiting Latvia's participation in a future fascist International – by attempting to remind Latvians that commonalities like the admiration for great

⁴⁹ 'Latvijas mazpulku karogs Italijai,' *Mazpulks*, July 15, 1935, 263.

⁵⁰ 'Dr. Kabalzers stahsta par eespaideem Latwijā,' *Pehdejā Brihdī*, June 18, 1935, 1. On the agrarian reform, see Andrejs Plakans and Charles Wetherell, *Riding the Tiger: The Latvian Agrarian Union and Agrarian Reform between the Two World Wars* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1996); A. Boruks, *Zemnieks, zeme un zemkopība Latvijā: no senākiem laikiem līdz mūsdienām* (Jelgava: Latvijas Lauksaimniecības universitāte, 2003); Arnolds Aizsilnieks, *Latvijas saimniecības vēsture 1914-1945* (Stockholm: Daugava, 1968); Oļģerts Krastiņš, *Latvijas saimniecības vēsturniskā pieredze* (Rīga: Latvijas valsts agrārās ekonomikas institūts, 1996, 2001).

⁵¹ Oļģerts Liepiņš, 'Romas ideja,' *Pehdejā Brihdī*, June 16, 1935, 1.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ 'Mussolini uzticības persona Rīgā,' 1.

⁵⁵ Liepiņš, 'Romas ideja,' 1.

leaders or the longing for a higher purpose should trump differences over the role of racism, etc.

Yet despite the fact that Cabalzar's words were widely reported in the Latvian press, in terms of building transnational fascist ties, his most important achievement was not reaching Latvian readers or perhaps even visiting with Ulmanis; rather it was establishing relations with organizations like *Mazpulki*. Indeed, upon his return home Cabalzar kept his word and worked to ensure that representatives of Latvian youth organizations received invitations to visit Italy. Most interesting here are the 1936 visit of Arnolds Lūsis and the 1937 trip taken by a small group of Latvian youth. Lūsis, the head of *Mazpulki's* education and propaganda department and the editor of the *Mazpulki* leaders' journal, *Vādītājs*, spent two weeks in Italy in March and April 1936. Although much of his trip was devoted to sightseeing, Lūsis did spend a significant amount of time at the new so-called *Città Universitaria* [University City], the new campus of *La Sapienza* that was built between 1932 and 1935, and *Foro Mussolini*, Mussolini's new sports complex noted for its exemplary 'fascist architecture,' where he met with members of local fascist youth organizations and observed the daily activities of its members.⁵⁶ Lūsis, a somewhat proficient Italian speaker (though the Latvian embassy in Rome also provided him with a translator), also gave talks about *Mazpulki*.⁵⁷

As for his impressions of Italy, Lūsis was very impressed with the discipline, vigor, and united mindset of the members of *Balilla*, the main youth organization in Fascist Italy. Most of all, Lūsis enjoyed seeing all of the pageantry and grandeur of *Balilla's* twenty year celebration on April 4, 1936, sights which surely informed his role in organizing *Mazpulki's* anniversary celebrations three years later. But Lūsis was critical of, in his eyes, the organization's over-emphasis on athletics. This sends the message, he opined in his two-part 1936 article in *Mazpulks* about his travels in Italy, that life is only fun and games. But since life is full of hard work, he reasoned, then *Mazpulki*, which emphasizes the virtues of work, is doing a much better job at educating its members.

Likewise, while touring the Italian countryside, he was amazed at the poor state of Italy's agricultural system. Here he assumed that this must be due to a combination of three possible factors: 1) the poor, shallow soils of the hilly countryside; 2) the laziness of Southern Europeans, who simply do not work as hard as Latvians; 3) the lack until quite recently of state-funded agricultural development programs. Lūsis closed his essay on his Italian travels by saying that while he was glad to experience a new and beautiful place, he was happy

⁵⁶) Borden W. Painter, *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 63–66. On *Foro Mussolini*, see pp. 40–49.

⁵⁷) LVVA, 2575. f., 9. apr., 115. l., 1–6. lp.

to return to his native Latvia, whose ‘white birch groves and green pine forests are just as beautiful as the southern palm trees.’⁵⁸

In addition to Lūsis, there is yet another interesting account of Latvians visiting Mussolini’s Italy—in 1937 a group of Latvians traveled to Rome to participate in *Campo Dux*, Mussolini’s annual fascist youth camp. However, this second story has a different origin, one that goes back to the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. As part of the camaraderie of the Games, the organizers invited each participating nation to send thirty youth representatives. The Latvian contingent – led by R. Ķirkums and F. Laursons, two leaders from Latvia’s Boy Scouts⁵⁹ – included three *Mazpulki* members. At the Games, the group lived in a youth camp and took in the competitions. Most memorably, they watched Jesse Owens run away with the 100 meter final, right after which – and one would think much to Hitler’s racist chagrin and the bafflement of their Nazi hosts – they made their way to the edge of the track to enthusiastically greet Owens, who kindly shook their hands. While at the youth camp, the Latvians also met Guglielmo Della Morte, the Italian consul in Berlin. Curious to learn more about Latvia, Della Morte struck up an amicable friendship with Laursons that, by the end of the Games, resulted in an invitation to attend the next *Campo Dux*.⁶⁰

Over the next year, Della Morte and Roger di Villanuova and V. Andreoletti at the Italian embassy in Riga worked to organize the Latvian group’s trip. The Italian government agreed to cover all of the transportation costs, and the Latvian Physical Culture and Sports Committee, with the backing of the Ministry of Education, also allocated 700 lats to cover the group’s daily expenses. On August 17, 1937, eight secondary school students – including *Mazpulki* member Uldis Vilciņš – and two leaders, Laursons and Captain lieutenant A. Lūks, departed by train for Mussolini’s *Campo Dux*.⁶¹ On their way, the group made stops, prearranged by the Italians, in Königsberg in East Prussia, where they visited a new Hitler Youth camp facility, and in Berlin,

⁵⁸ Arnolds Lūsis, ‘Itaļu zemnieks un jaunatne,’ *Mazpulks*, July 15, 1936, 306. See also Arnolds Lūsis, ‘Citronu zeme,’ *Mazpulks*, June 15, 1936, 254–256.

⁵⁹ Much like *Mazpulki*, American Boy Scouts was also imported to Latvia. For an interesting discussion on post-1934 *Mazpulki-Skauti* [Scouts] relations and the regime’s ostensible favoritism towards *Mazpulki*, see Dunsdorfs, *Kārļa Ulmaņa dzīve*, 313–314.

⁶⁰ R. Ķirkums, ‘Latviešu skolu jaunatne XI olimpiādē Berlīnē,’ *Audzinātājs*, October 1, 1936, 602–603; G. Meierovics, ‘XI Olimpiāde Berlīnē,’ *Mazpulks*, December 15, 1936, 558; Fr. Laursons, ‘Latviešu jaunatnes reprezentācijas vienības brauciens uz Itāliju un Vāciju 1937. g. 17. aug. – 15. sept.’ *Fiziskā kultūra un sports*, November 1, 1937, 307.

⁶¹ ‘Mūsu jaunatnes pārstāvji piedalīsies Campo Mussolini sanāksmē,’ *Jaunākās ziņas*, July 22, 1937, 6; Fr. Laursons, ‘Latviešu jaunatnes reprezentācijas vienības brauciens uz Itāliju un Vāciju 1937. g. 17. aug. – 15. sept. (Turpinājums),’ *Fiziskā kultūra un sports*, December 1, 1937, 349–350; ‘Izraudzīti Latvijas pārstāvji ‘Camp Musolini’ sanāksmei,’ *Rīts*, August 3, 1937, 6. For a list of the students, see LVVA, 4820. f., 1. apr., 113. l., 233. lp.

where they were put up in a new Hitler Youth hostel boat anchored on the Spree River. They also dined with Hitler Youth leaders at the famed Aschinger restaurant, visited the exhibitions for the city's seven hundred year anniversary, and met with Della Morte at the *Fascio* institute. A few days later they made the last leg of the trip – along with a group of Italian nationals living in Germany, a cohort of Hitler Youth, and groups from Sweden and Finland – through Innsbruck, the Brenner Pass, and down to Rome. Upon arriving at the camp, which Vilciņš described in his *Mazpulks* article as 'a tent city,' they learned that there were more than four thousand youth, mostly of Italian heritage, from at least twenty-two countries. Additionally, there were also a number of special visitor groups of non-Italian heritage. Besides the Latvians, there were groups from Finland, Germany, France, Bulgaria, Holland, Luxembourg, and China.⁶²

In his article in *Mazpulks*, Vilciņš explained that camp life consisted of four main activities: marching, singing, call-and-response rallies, and sports. They typically arose at 5:00, drilled until 11:00, when lunch was served, and then resumed training until 18:00. In the evenings movies were often shown, but most of these, Vilciņš lamented, 'were what we would call "sensationalist" films or also fascist propaganda films.'⁶³ Although Vilciņš surprisingly does not discuss it, we know from other accounts, including Laursons's, that all of this training culminated in a grand march on the *Via dell'Imperio* in the heart of Rome. The 1937 iteration took place on September 4, coincidentally the same day as Ulmanis's grand sixtieth birthday festivities back in Riga. Amid his other memories, Laursons recalled as a point of pride that when his group neared Mussolini's box, they received his full attention. Not recognizing the Latvian flag, Mussolini pointed at the group while leaning down to ask one of his ministers for a clarification. Having received an answer, Mussolini very emphatically smiled and waved at the Latvians, who, like the rest of the marchers, were merrily singing folk songs.⁶⁴

For Vilciņš, one of the most interesting and exciting aspects of the camp was the chance to learn about other cultures. In particular, he was fascinated by the Italian and German youth and how they differed from Latvians. In a private letter to his local club leader back in Riga, Vilciņš wrote:

In Latvia peace is viewed as the norm, and thus productive work stands as the primary goal. Young people in Latvia are of course prepared for war, but only in order to defend the

⁶² Uldis Vilciņš, 'Kā strādā Itālijas un Vācijas jaunatne,' *Mazpulks*, December 15, 1937, 556–557; Laursons, 'Latviešu jaunatnes reprezentācijas vienības brauciens uz Itāliju un Vāciju 1937. g. 17. aug. – 15. sept. (Turpinājums),' 349–350; Fr. Laursons, '4000 zēnu noietne pīniju paēnā: Vēstule "Rītam" no Campo Musolini,' *Rīts*, August 24, 1937, 3.

⁶³ Vilciņš, 'Kā strādā Itālijas un Vācijas jaunatne,' 556–557.

⁶⁴ Laursons, 'Latviešu jaunatnes reprezentācijas vienības brauciens uz Itāliju un Vāciju 1937. g. 17. aug. – 15. sept. (Turpinājums),' 350–353.

fatherland and nation. Here in Italy the viewpoints are the exact opposite. War is viewed as the norm. They say: 'We don't have any space here in Italy. But we will get it.' In such a way the Italian youth are prepared for an unending war. Productive work doesn't even get mentioned here. In Germany we can see a combination of these two viewpoints. Although the youth are prepared for war, they are also familiar with productive work.⁶⁵

Similarly, Laursons also felt that the camp confirmed the peaceful nature and overall superiority of Latvian culture. Describing his overall impressions of the camp for his readers, Laursons recollected:

Those were unforgettably lovely days which will remain for a long time with us, and the rest of the camp participants, as fond memories. It was not only the good relations among the leaders, but also within a short time an ideal camp friendship developed among the rest of the youth. This friendship confirms that we, despite being youth representatives from Europe's north, middle, and southern regions, nonetheless still think in a similar way in that we all have common ideals, common goals, and similar views about the youth's tasks—to shape their nation's positive characteristics until they are perfect; to exhibit to the rest of their national brethren their nation's successes and the splendor of their fatherland; to foster self-confidence while creating a mutual understanding which will serve true world peace, a peace which we all need in order that we might reach the possible high stages of culture and enjoy the fruits of those good relations; and to be proud, conscientious, genuine, and happy people so that we might vindicate our existence in this world.⁶⁶

Finally, he concluded that, for him, the camp confirmed that 'we Latvians have already reached this stage . . . We are able to point out to other states our . . . nation's successes [which prove] that we are not at all just members of some small, unnoteworthy nation.'⁶⁷

This last sentiment – that receiving an invitation to *Campo Dux* and having Mussolini directly smile and wave at their group, even if moments before he had no idea who they were, proved that Latvia was part of the community of advanced Western countries – offers a key insight into the national identity that shaped Ulmanis's version of Latvian fascism.⁶⁸ Simply put, their geographic location at the border between West and East and their long history of foreign subjugation caused Latvians to often feel isolated and inferior. Following their declaration of national independence – and with an eye to the

⁶⁵ LVVA, 4820. f., 1. apr., 113. l., 226. lp.

⁶⁶ Laursons, 'Latviešu jaunatnes reprezentācijas vienības brauciens uz Itāliju un Vāciju 1937. g. 17. aug. – 15. sept. (Turpinājums)', 349.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that prior to the coup there was a more extreme fascist movement known first as *Ugunskrusts* [Fire Cross] and later as *Pērkonkrusts* [Thunder Cross]. First founded by Gustavs Celmiņš in 1932, the organization was quickly banned, though it did continue to have a very small following until Ulmanis repressed the movement and forced Celmiņš into exile following his coup. Among the other differences with the Ulmanis version of Latvian fascism, *Pērkonkrusts* more directly imitated National Socialism, especially in its racist and anti-Semitic ideology. See Armands Paeglis, *Pērkonkrusts pār Latviju: 1932-1944* (Rīga: Zvaigzne, 1994).

Bolshevik threat to the east – a majority of Latvians decided that Latvia needed to prove its rightful membership in the West. In 1918, this decision led to the founding of a democratic parliamentary system, as that was the progressive, Wilsonian trend of the day. But by 1934, as the authoritarian wave was sweeping over Europe, it seemed to many Latvians that they would have to follow the new so-called ‘third way’ in order to ensure their pro-West, anti-Bolshevik identity.⁶⁹ To be sure, while the Bolshevik threat was rarely part of the Ulmanis regime’s ideology, as they preferred to build an identity of affirmation rather than negation, there is no doubt that such a threat intensified their desire for approval by the Western powers. Consequently, it should not be surprising, and especially given the fact that the regime increasingly curbed the freedom of the press, that in an anonymous, front-page editorial of the newspaper *Latvijas Kareivis*, to give but one example, Cabalzar’s trip to Latvia was interpreted as proof that Latvia’s political, economic, and cultural efforts to prove its full membership in the West had finally yielded noteworthy results.⁷⁰

As for the journeys through fascism surveyed in this article, it is fascinating to see how unique national cultures shaped the travelers’ interpretations of both local and transnational fascism. For example, apparently understanding that Latvians found violence, physical vigor, and hyper-militarism less appealing than Italians – and one has to assume that his discussion with Ulmanis must have been insightful in this regard – Cabalzar attempted to revise Latvians’ image of Mussolini by, in his interviews, portraying Mussolini as a gentle, benevolent family father. It is no coincidence that this was exactly how Ulmanis sought to portray himself, as epitomized in his self-identification as the *Saimnieks* [husbandman] of Latvia.⁷¹ For their part, it is clear that the Latvians equated transnational fascism with not only militarism and the aesthetics of salutes and slogans, as we saw in the case of Cabalzar’s visit to an *Aizsargi* exercise, but also, given the activities the Ulmanis regime arranged for him, with the importance of ultranationalism, youth organizations, and big, state-led projects like agrarian reform.

Yet, while the Latvian leaders did seem to understand at least some of the differences between Italian and Latvian fascism, for the young Latvians who journeyed through Italian Fascism, they were shocked at the level of militarism, at the desire for war (as opposed to their own hope for international

⁶⁹ For a discussion of intellectual trends in Latvia, see Ieva Zake, *Nineteenth-Century Nationalism and Twentieth-Century Anti-Democratic Ideals: The Case of Latvia, 1840s to 1980s* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

⁷⁰ ‘Rīgā, 16. jūnijā,’ *Latvijas kareivis*, June 16, 1935, 1.

⁷¹ *Saimnieks* is a difficult word to accurately translate. The root of the word, *saim-*, comes from *saimē*, which means family or household. So in one way the word can be understood as the patriarch of the family and household. But the term has also historically been used to refer to a free, landed farmer or property owner.

peace), and at the lack of a diligent work ethic, all of which made them appear in comparison to the Germans – whom the *Campo Dux* group learned a lot more about during their subsequent attendance at the Hitler Youth Congress in Nuremberg – to be both lazy and even more bellicose. Thus, for these travelers, their experiences, which of course were widely reported, simultaneously confirmed Latvia's membership in the 'renewed' West while also pointing out those attributes which made Latvia unique and, in many ways, superior.⁷²

Conclusion

This article has revealed that the case of Ulmanis's Latvia offers telling insights into the nature, movement, and transformation of interwar fascism. At the national level, it has argued that *Mazpulki* serves as a microcosm of Latvian fascism during the Ulmanis regime. At the transnational level, the article investigated *Mazpulki's* international fascist interactions, in this case mostly with Italians. But it would be equally telling to examine similar stories involving Latvians and Germans. To give just one possibility, there is the curious case of Hitler Youth leaders from Allenstein (present-day Olsztyn) placing commemorative wreaths in the Cemetery of Brothers – a cemetery, of course, which honors those who died fighting, among others, the Germans – while visiting Latvia in summer 1939 as the guests of *Mazpulki*.⁷³

What these and other possible vignettes suggest is that fascism never existed in a vacuum, nor was there one 'ideal' form. Rather, since it was a latecomer as a modern political ideology, fascism rose on the fringes as the ultimate syncretic political system.⁷⁴ Consequently, using the transnational fascism model, we can see the complex reasons why and how fascism was adopted and developed (including, as this article has shown, as a result of personal or organizational connections), and why it seemed at times to be at variance in its national manifestations. In the case of Latvia, it seems from the evidence offered here that Ulmanis turned to fascism because, among other reasons, he believed that fascism was, as he put in his speech to *Mazpulki* leaders, 'the spirit of the future' and the new 'Western way.' Consequently, regardless of whatever his own ambitions might have been, surely part of the turn to fascism was rooted in a

⁷² On their German travels, see especially Fr. Laursons, 'Latviešu jaunatnes reprezentācijas vienības brauciens uz Italiju un Vāciju 1937. g. 17. aug. – 15. sept. (Beigas),' *Fiziskā kultūra un sports*, January 1, 1938, 33–38.

⁷³ 'Mazpulku dzīve,' *Mazpulkis*, May 15, 1939, 235.

⁷⁴ See J.J. Linz's astute analysis in 'Political Space and Fascism as a Latecomer,' in *Who Were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism*, ed. S.U. Larsen, B. Hagtvet, and J.P. Myklebust (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980), 153–189.

desire to ensure that Latvia would remain a part of the West.⁷⁵ This means, then, that if we are to truly understand the Ulmanis regime – or for that matter any interwar fascist regime – then we must identify and analyze the transnational fascist influences that shaped it, for despite the fact that fascism never yielded a Fascist International, he and other fascists of the 1930s clearly saw themselves as belonging to a legitimate, promising transnational movement. But then, of course, its promise turned to nightmare.

⁷⁵ Aldis Purs has also discussed in his outstanding chapter on tourism in Latvia how the regime's tourism program was influenced by 'Western' models. See Aldis Purs, 'One Breath for Every Two Strides: The State's Attempt to Construct Tourism and Identity in Interwar Latvia,' in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane E. Koenker (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 97–115. Beyond Purs's chapter, most scholarship on the Ulmanis regime has focused on domestic events. In particular the question of Ulmanis's personal ambitions and the role of economic and political crises have loomed large. For a good historiographical essay, see Valters Ščerbinskis's introduction in *Apvērsums: 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*.